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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted to test the hypothesis that for an "uninvolving topic" the persuasiveness of a highly credible communicator would be mediated by the favorability of the communicator-related thoughts generated, while for an "involving topic" the effect of the communicator's credibility would be mediated by the favorability of the message. Sixty undergraduate students in four experimental groups and one control group listened to radio interview tapes concerning a policy change that would or would not affect them and, involving speakers related to or unconnected with the issue. Subjects then completed a booklet containing the dependent measures. All subjects accurately recalled the topic of the persuasive message and whether the proposed policy change was to go into effect immediately (high involvement) or in 10 years (low involvement). Subjects in the high credibility condition rated the speaker as more knowledgeable, qualified, expert, and skilled, and also expressed stronger agreement with the message than did subjects in the low credibility conditions. The results suggest that while listening to the persuasive message, uninvolved subjects thought primarily about the speaker, while the involved subjects thought primarily about the persuasive message. This pattern is consistent with the argument that uninvolved subjects use a heuristic suggested by the communicator's credibility to evaluate the message, while involved subjects evaluate the message according to the strength of the argument. (HTH)

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Communicator-Related and Message-Related Thoughts as Mediators of the Influence of Communicator Credibility on Persuasion

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1. Title Communicator-Related and Message-Related Thoughts as Mediators of the Influence of Communicator Credibility on Persuasion

2. Topical Session Preference Social Psychology: Attitude Change

3. Problem

The role of the credibility of a communicator in persuasion has been investigated primarily with relatively uninvolving topics, when, according to Petty and Cacioppo (1981), persuasion is most likely to occur via a peripheral route. Alternatively, Chaiken's (1980) analysis suggests that the credibility of a communicator is particularly influential because messages concerning uninvolving topics are processed heuristically. When one is unwilling to expend much cognitive effort to evaluate a message, the heuristic suggested by a communicator's credibility (e.g., "experts are usually right") may be viewed as one of the most reliable bases on which to decide whether to accept or reject a message.

In contrast, persuasive messages concerning highly involving topics are processed systematically. Whether or not attitude change occurs depends on the favorability of the thoughts generated in response to the arguments employed. The role of a communicator's credibility under such circumstances is less clear. On the one hand, Petty, Cacioppo, and Goldman (1981) reported that manipulation of a communicator's credibility affected the persuasivness of a message when the topic was uninvolving, but had no effect if the topic was involving. More recently, Heesacker, Petty, and Cacioppo (1983) reported that manipulation of a communicator's credibility affected the persuasiveness of a message concerning a highly involving topic for field dependent (but not field independent) subjects.

The role played by the thoughts generated in response to a persuasive communication is crucial to distinctions between central and peripheral routes to persuasion and between systematic and heuristic processing. According to Chaiken (1980), message-related thoughts mediate persuasion when a message is processed systematically, whereas thoughts related to the heuristic employed (often based on the communicator's characteristics) mediate persuasion when a communication is processed heuristically. The

purpose of the present experiment was to demonstrate that although a communicator's credibility can influence persuasiveness of messages concerning highly involving topics as well as messages concerning uninvolving topics, the mediating events are not the same. Specifically, we hypothesized that for an uninvolving topic, the persuasiveness of a highly credible communicator would be mediated by the favorability of the communicator-related thoughts generated. For an involving topic however, the effect of the communicator's credibility would be mediated by the favorability of message-related thoughts generated.

4. Subjects

To recruit participants for the study, the female experimenter approached 30 male and 30 female non-senior undergraduates individually in their dormitory rooms and asked them to help her to evaluate tapes for their broadcast quality. All agreed to do so and were assigned to the five conditions (four experimental and one control) following a randomized block procedure.

5. Procedure

The experimenter explained that in the interests of obtaining a wide variety of opinions on proposed changes in academic policy, a faculty committee had asked the host of a campus radio program to interview several people from the university and surrounding community. The level of involvement was manipulated by telling half of the experimental subjects that the policy change would be instituted the following year, thereby affecting them personally (high involvement), and the remaining experimental subjects that the change would be instituted in ten years (low involvement). The communicator's credibility was manipulated by varying the communicator's response to the interviewer's opening question concerning his background. On one tape the communicator described himself as the chairperson of the faculty committee on academic reevaluation with a doctorate in education (high credibility). On the second tape the communicator described himself as a postman who had attended a local community college and was interested in the academic standing of the university (low credibility). The remainder of the interview was

identical for the two tapes.

During the course of the interview the communicator gave eight arguments supporting the institution of comprehensive examinations. So that the arguments would be strong, yet equally plausible for both levels of credibility, the "strong" communication arguments employed by Petty, Harkins, and Williams (1980) were modified by deleting supporting statistics.

After listening to the tape, each subject completed a booklet containing the dependent measures. Subjects indicated their position on the topic on a Likert-type question and on four semantic differential scales, listed the thoughts that occurred to them while listening to the tape, summarized the topic of the interview, were given four minutes to recall the arguments used, and indicated their reactions to the communicator and the interview. The thoughts listed by each subject were assigned to one of the following categories by two independent raters (r=.86) who were blind to condition: positive message-related (M+), negative message-related (M-), positive communicator-related (C+), negative communicator-related (C-), irrelevant (I). All subjects were then thoroughly debriefed. Subjects in the control condition were given the same rationale for the study, but completed an opinion survey (containing the main dependent measure) instead of listening to a tape.

6. Results

All subjects accurately recalled the topic of the persuasive communication and whether the proposed change was to go into effect immediately or in ten years. Scores on all other measures were subjected to 2 X 2 analyses of variance. Credibility main effects were obtained indicating that the communicator was judged to be more knowledgeable, qualified, expert, and skilled in the high (vs. low) credibility conditions (all F's > 5.0). Analysis of the number of arguments recalled revealed no significant effects.

A credibility main effect was obtained on the main attitude measure, indicating

that subjects in the high credibility conditions expressed stronger agreement with the message than did subjects in the low credibility conditions (see Table 1), $F(1, 52)=49.08$, $p < .001$. Furthermore, comparisons based on Dunnett's (1980) procedure indicated that means in both high credibility conditions, but neither low credibility condition, were significantly different from the control mean. Similarly, analysis of the summed semantic differential scores revealed only a credibility main effect, $F(1, 52)=55.72$, $p < .001$.

Apparently, the high credibility communicator was equally persuasive whether the topic was highly involving or not. Nevertheless, analysis of the thought-listing measures indicated that the process by which the highly credible communicator influenced attitudes differed according to the level of involvement. Both the types of thoughts generated and the relationship between the thoughts generated and the final attitude were different. More communicator-related thoughts were generated by subjects in the low involvement conditions than by subjects in the high involvement conditions, $F(1, 52)=9.77$, $p < .01$. These thoughts were predominantly positive for the highly credible communicator and predominantly negative for the communicator with low credibility, as indicated by credibility main effects obtained when the C+ and C- thoughts were analyzed separately (both F's > 4.50).

Analysis of the message-related thoughts revealed both an involvement main effect, $F(1, 52)= 8.05$, $p < .01$, and a marginally significant interaction, $F(1, 52)=3.85$, $p < .06$. In the high involvement conditions generation of message-related thoughts was enhanced when the communicator's credibility was high (vs. low), but in the low involvement conditions generation of message-related thoughts was suppressed when the communicator's credibility was high (vs. low).

These results suggest that while listening to the persuasive communication, uninvolved subjects thought primarily about the communicator and involved subjects thought primarily about the persuasive communication. This pattern is consistent with the argument that uninvolved subjects used a heuristic suggested by the communicator's

credibility to evaluate the message, but involved subjects evaluated the message according to the strength of the arguments. In fact, scores on the final attitude measure were highly correlated with scores on the index of favorability of message-related thoughts, (M+)-(M-), $r(28)=.65$, $p < .001$, but not with any of the measures or indices based on communicator-related thoughts (all r's $< .20$). In contrast, in the low involvement conditions, scores on the main attitude measure were correlated most highly with the favorability of communicator-related thoughts, (C+)-(C-), $r(28)=.51$, $p < .01$. A marginally significant correlation was obtained between attitudes and favorability of message-related thoughts as well, $r(28)=.36$, $p < .07$, suggesting that although heuristic processing predominated, low involvement subjects engaged in some systematic processing.

7. Implications and Conclusions

The present results indicate that a communicator's credibility can influence persuasion by two quite different processes. When a message is processed systematically, more message-related thoughts (which influence the degree of subsequent attitude change) are generated if the communicator is highly credible. When a communication is processed heuristically, the communicator's credibility offers a convenient heuristic and generation of communicator-related thoughts is enhanced, influencing the degree of subsequent attitude change. It may be that the credibility of a communicator is unique in its ability to influence both heuristically and systematically processed messages. Nevertheless, the present results provide further evidence that understanding persuasion requires examination not only of the effects on attitudes, but also the types of thoughts generated in response to a persuasive communication and their relative importance as mediators of attitude change.

8. References

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Table 1

Average Final Attitudes and Average Number of Positive (C+) and Negative (C-) Communicator-Related and Positive (M+) and Negative (M-) Message-Related Thoughts as a Function of Communicator Credibility and Level of Involvement

Communicator Credibility	Level of Involvement	
	High	Low
High		
Attitude	11.00	11.93
C+	.93	1.14
C-	.43	.78
M+	1.00	.64
M-	1.36	.64
Low		
Attitude	6.43	5.86
C+	.21	.36
C-	.86	1.57
M+	.79	.29
M-	1.36	1.50

Note. For the control condition on the attitude measure, $\bar{X}$=6.28, on a scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree with the proposed comprehensive examination requirement) to 15 (strongly agree).